

PUBLIC SCHOOL ATHLETICIS.

Tim Chandler

College of Fine and Professional Arts, Kent State University, Ohio.

When applied to the English Public schools, the term 'athleticism' has been described in terms ranging from 'excessive worship of the athlete and athletic success' and 'the exaltation of games at the expense of academic work' to 'the development of good moral character on the games field' and 'an outstanding preparation for life which inspired virtue, developed manliness and bred leaders.'

The period from 1840 to 1940 saw the growth and development of this ideology, which was fostered by a variety of groups and individuals associated with the Public schools, for a wide variety of reasons. For headmasters, athletic success was often used as a means of attracting publicity, and thus numbers, to his school, whilst at the same time compulsory participation meant that games could be used as a means of controlling large numbers of boys once they had left the classroom. While for many boys, and some masters, games were a simple physical pastime and pleasure; increasingly they became justified as a means of imparting moral and educational value. For parents, games were a means of promoting healthy outdoor activity, while for headmasters and governors they became measures of school success and means of promoting loyalty to their school. All of these elements can be said to have underpinned the growth and development of organised games and their concomitant ideology of athleticism in those schools which became known as public schools in the years following 1840.

* The term Public school had no specific definition. However, most would agree that by the mid 19th century this group of schools could be identified as 'independent, non-local, fee-paying, predominantly boarding schools for the upper-middle classes.' The concept of a public school had evolved slowly from the Middle Ages when such schools were attended by boys who would eventually become ordained, or take minor orders and were trained for such professions as the law, civil service, teaching and, most importantly, the Church. The 17th and 18th centuries saw increasing acceptance by the aristocracy of an education at schools such as Eton, Westminster and Winchester. The sons of the emerging business and professional classes were increasingly sent to 'rub shoulders' with the sons of the aristocracy and nobility, and in doing so creating a new caste – the

English Public school boy. The way to ensure the status of a gentleman for one's son by the 150's was to send him to one of the Public schools.

The significance of these schools by the mid 19th century is summed up by Leslie Stephen who, in 1868, wrote:

"Neither the British jury, nor the House of Lords, nor the Church of England, nay scarcely the monarchy itself, seems so deeply enshrined in the bosoms of our countrymen as our public schools."

The "Sacred Seven" public schools – Charterhouse, Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Westminster and Winchester - had been joined by new schools such as Cheltenham, Marlborough, and Wellington, and endowed grammar schools such as Repton, Sherborne, Tonbridge and Uppingham, to form the core of the schools thought of as public schools by 1868. These schools, which became centres for the development of organised games as educational tools promoting "godliness and good learning", were to inspire the founder of the modern Olympic games and generate an ideology of athleticism, which spread throughout the British Empire.

Winchester, founded in 1382 with 70 scholars, was the first of these schools to experience the need for providing space for physical activity. Forms of football and cricket appear to have been played by the scholars from the mid-17th century onwards, although forms of tennis and fives were played even earlier. Eton (1440) and Westminster (1560) developed many of the same activities. The great increase in the number of boarders throughout the 18th century encouraged the further development of team games in all seven of these schools.

Eton played cricket matches against Westminster, and later Winchester and Harrow, from 1796 onwards, with Eton versus Harrow being the oldest continuous fixture on today's cricket calendar. Matches at cricket spawned other contests, notably in rowing between Eton and Westminster. Detailed records of cricket and rowing at both schools are to be found from the early years of the 19th century. These were 'boy-organised' and 'boy-run' activities. The head of each sport collected subscriptions, engaged professional coaches, and organised contests. The increasing interest, influence and (finally) control by masters was a feature that did not emerge until mid-century and was more typical of the newer public schools with little or no history of boy-organised and boy-controlled activities.

As a game with a central organising body and an established set of laws, cricket was an ideal summer activity for inter-school matches. It was a standardised and regulated activity. The same was not true of the major winter activity, football. As such, each school developed its own variety (or varieties) of football. Local conditions framed such games and provided a context for a wide number of variations, some of which (e.g. The Eton Wall Game, Harrow Football, Winchester Football) have survived alongside the two major forms played at the time – the Association's football and Rugby's football.

From their somewhat casual acceptance by the aristocracy in the 18th century, the public schools became the centres of education for the upper-middle classes in the 19th century by absorbing the sons of the emerging business and professional classes. They became "social agencies" and were described by one contemporary as furnishing neither "the best moral nor the best mental discipline... but they are the theatres of athletic manners and the training places of a gallant, generous spirit for the English gentleman." In addition, the English middle classes, influenced by the Evangelical movement, were religious. Their aim in education was largely "godliness and good learning." The increased emphasis on gentlemanly character and strong moral principles propounded by Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby (1828-1842) quickly permeated all of the schools, which were increasingly in competition with each other for students.

The critical decade in the development of organised games was the 1850's, as Cheltenham, Harrow, Marlborough, Uppingham and others – each under new, vigorous headmasters in the Arnold mould, - promoted organised games and developed very successful schools. This was a complete change from the early years of the century when headmasters tried to prevent activities such as football, rowing, and cross-country running. By mid-century, the publication of *Tom Brown's School Days* and the promotion of muscular Christianity had provided both some exemplars and an ideology to support a philosophy of education which was grounded in the belief that competitive sport, and notably team games, had a basis in moral as well as physical health, and that training in moral behaviour on the playing field was transferable to life beyond school. The 'tag' of muscular Christianity originated in a review of Charles Kingsley's *Two Years Ago* (1857) written by T.C. Sandars in the *Saturday Review*. Kingsley was influential in promoting athleticism because, for him, a defining characteristic of muscular Christianity was an association between physical strength,

religious certainty and the ability to shape and control the world around oneself. For public school headmasters following Arnold, there were lessons for boys to learn in the Chapel and on the games field, which were quite as important as those to be learned in the classroom. The term muscular Christianity was a useful shorthand to describe the content of these philosophies.

As the nineteenth century progressed and religious doubt and uncertainty became less central to late Victorian thought, the Christian element of muscular Christianity was dissipated becoming Christian muscularity and finally moral manliness. Manliness, morality, health and even nationalism were now the values to be imbued through team games. In addition, between 1850 and 1900, and despite its diverse origins and differing contexts, athleticism displayed a broad measure of conformity among its major features, all of which appeared to support the promotion of these values. Thus, schools developed large games-fields, they developed much of the paraphernalia long associated with sport – caps, scarves, stockings, ties, badges, blazers, cravats etc.: and they developed a range of rituals to support this ideology – being capped, being blooded, getting one's colours, and singing songs usually written by staff or old boys. Rugby songs were very common and contained such jingoistic refrains as:

Scrum, scrum, scrum; Run, run, run
It's jolly hard work but it's jolly good fun
And when it is half over it's only just begun
Sing 'Hey' for the gutter and for Glory!

Rugby football became a major element of this ideology, being the only compulsory sporting activity in the majority of the schools. As scholars have recently argued with regard to the body, masculinity is constituted by particular body shapes and textures, certain postures and modes of movement which differentiate the masculine from the feminine whilst drawing attention to the profound significance of particular masculine or feminine bodily experiences in the formation of identity. Learning to be a man involves learning to use the body in such ways as to project a physical presence that suggests latent power. Rugby football came to be seen as *the* way through which to become a man because it was thought to promote manliness and muscularity, courage and good character – factors that were increasingly necessary in the running of an Empire on which 'the sun never set.' Thus, by the end of the 19th century, the playing field was seen as a

aining ground for, and even the moral equivalent of, the battlefield. Darwinist notions of "strength through struggle" further underpinned this ideology of athleticism and gave credence to the belief that football (and particularly Rugby's football) would produce the kind of "toughness of muscle and toughness of heart" that was necessary to sustain a rising generation of national leaders and imperial rulers. By 1900 sport had ceased to be thought of as a means to an end and was, in the vast majority of the schools, an end in itself. The cult of athleticism dominated not only much of public school life but also upper-middle class life.

The close links between the public schools and Oxbridge meant that similar effects were felt there also. And while the "diffusion thesis" for the growth of organised games across Britain is at best only a partial explanation for the spread of sport, there is evidence that public school and university-educated young men were indeed responsible for diffusing sport as they carried their games to all parts of Britain and the Empire by the early years of the 20th century. The development of public schools for girls in the second half of the 19th century, often directly paralleled the boys' schools and organised games such as hockey, cricket, tennis and lacrosse were the favoured activities. This was also indicative of the strength of the public school model and its ideology of athleticism.

Whilst the stress on games in general and rugby football in particular has been dissipated in recent years, the notion of team games as a vehicle for education and the development of 'character' still continues as a remarkably resilient ideology. This has profoundly shaped the practice of sport in schools in cultures as different as Australia and Japan. In England also, the public school legacy of games-playing can still be observed in the enormous emphasis placed on the teaching and learning of team games in the National Curriculum for Physical Education.

Further reading

Mangan, J., *Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School*, Cambridge University Press 1981.

Money, T., *Manly and Muscular Diversions*, London, Duckworth, 1997.

Chandler, T., "The Structuring of Manliness" in, J. Nauright and T. Chandler (Eds.), *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, London, Cass, 1996), pp13-31.

PUBLIC SCHOOL ATHLETICISM

Tim Chandler

1. *Using your own words define 'Athleticism'*
2. *The Public schools regarded athletic success as most important. Why did Headmasters, Assistant Masters, parents and Governors value athleticism so much?*
3. *Chandler describes public schools as 'independent, non-local, fee-paying, predominantly boarding schools for the upper-middle classes'. What other characteristics can you identify?*
4. *Why was cricket an acceptable game in public schools?*
5. *Why does Chandler suggest that the 1850's was a 'critical decade'?*
6. *What values were the Headmasters of these public schools trying to promote through the playing of games?*
7. *How did such a small number of school have such an impact upon the development of sport in this country and world-wide?*